

NOTES FROM: The Better Angels of Our Nature, by Steven Pinker

SUMMARY: The first four hundred pages of this book read like the synopsis of a horror movie. It's extremely tough to make it through - not because it's a particularly challenging book in terms of style, but rather because it details the nauseating, atrocious history of human violence across the centuries.

But then, a few hundred years ago, a fascinating thing started to happen. Violence declined dramatically across the entire planet (with some obvious exceptions in the first part of the twentieth century), and more people started to die of diseases instead of gory, violent deaths. Pinker attributes this to several factors, including global governance, and the rise of empathy engendered by...reading.

Part of his thesis is that, coinciding with the rise in global literacy, people everywhere began developing the ability to psychologically inhabit the subjective mental states of others. This, along with the spread of global democracy, international treaties, etc., ushered in one of the most unprecedented periods of (relative) peace in human history.

Now, obviously, it doesn't always seem that way if you watch the news. And he doesn't rule out the eruption of mass-scale violence in the future. That being said, the (again, horrific) evidence Pinker points to shows that compared to the chances you had of dying a violent death, being alive today means that you're more likely to die of old age than an enemy's axe. All in all, it's an extremely hopeful book, and even though we have plenty of work to do, much of that work has already begun.

"It's easy to forget how deeply brutality was once woven into the fabric of daily existence."

Violence offends our sensibilities now because it is so much less common. When human societies were much more violent, it wouldn't bother us so much because we would see it so often. It's an excellent sign of our progress that violence is so universally condemned.

Years ago, when researchers uncovered a frozen corpse that had been preserved for thousands of years, traces of blood from three other early humans were found on his clothes.

The violence in the Bible is nothing less than staggering. There are more than 600 passages about killing others, more than 1,000 times God gives a direct command for someone to commit murder, and there are more than 1.2 million mass killing deaths in the Bible as well. Sunday school children today now draw pictures of those figures from the Bible in crayon.

Honor exists because everyone believes that everyone else believes that it exists. It's a shared cultural reality that has led to an incredible amount of senseless violence.

Chimps commit genocide too. In fact, chimps will isolate lone males from other groups and murder them for their resources.

People fight for three reasons: Gain, Safety, and to display a Credible Deterrence.

“Part of the bargain of being alive is taking the chance of dying premature or painful death.”

6 billion people died in the 20th century and only 0.7 percent were battle deaths.

Only .008 percent of Americans who died in 2005 were victims of violence.

Living in a civilization decreases one's chances of being a victim of violence fivefold.

The positive-sum of commerce operates best under a Leviathan and led to increased peace as people were more useful alive than dead.

It's easier to deter people from crime if the lawful alternative is more attractive.

Violence became less common among aristocrats and moved down slowly through the lower classes.

Most of what we conceive of as crime is justice in the eyes of the perpetrator.

Most murders are for justice or retaliation etc, and not for "practical" purposes.

Some people just do what they think is right and then willingly suffer the consequences from the state.

Perpetrators aren't necessarily devoid of morality or justice, but instead feel it more acutely. They're motivated by justice or retribution, but the law sees it differently.

Lower class people in today's society, or at least some of them, are effectively stateless because they don't have recourse to the law to protect them. Nominally they do, of course, but the nature of their activities and the resources that the government employs to help them make them more likely targets of violence.

Most violence is committed by men aged 15 to 30.

Violence is often a reproductive competitive advantage. In the past, an effective way to eliminate a sexual rival was just to kill them.

Marriage has a pacifying effect on violent offenders. As men get married, they become less violent and commit fewer violent crimes.

“The presence of women has civilizing benefits, but only when they can effectively entice violent men to become docile husbands.”

All those young men who aren't raising their children are hanging out with each other instead and competing for dominance.

It's more likely that women in crime-prone environments have more unwanted children, than the idea that unwanted children necessarily commit more crimes or at least cause crime to go up directly.

America has, as of 2015, the highest incarceration rate on the planet.

There is an optimum incarceration rate, but America is unlikely to find it, especially in a system where judges are elected and anyone who says that too many people are in jail will be accused of being soft on crime.

For a criminal justice system to work properly, citizens must perceive it as fair, and with a strong chance that deviant behavior will be punished.

People, and especially those who engage in crime, steeply discount the future and respond more readily to immediately apparent small punishments than to hypothetical big ones down the road.

“People conceive of their relationships with other people and institutions in moral terms, categorizing them as either contests for raw dominance or social contracts based on fairness and reciprocity.”

A criminal justice system needs to be consistent and predictable.

Empathy and self-control are the internal drivers of the civilizing process.

Between 1440 and 1524 CE, the Aztecs sacrificed 40 people per day, for a total of 1.2 million deaths. Christians used to ritually sacrifice people as well.

Challenge a person's beliefs and you challenge his dignity, standing, and power.

The death toll of the Crusader massacres as a proportion of the world's population would today come out at around 6 million, equivalent to Germany in World War II.

The founder of Protestantism wrote a book called "On the Jews and Their Lies."

Several of the Wars of Religion had death tolls proportionally higher than World War I.

Rummel estimates that between the time of Jesus and the 20th century, 19 million people were executed for trivial reasons.

Well before Africans were enslaved by Europeans, they were enslaved by other Africans.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, 1.5 million slaves died in transatlantic slave ships.

Between 17 million and 65 million Africans died in the slave trade overall.

Rummel estimates that governments killed 133 million people up to the 20th century and the total may be as high as 625 million.

Mozi: "If you see the killing of one person as wrong, but a hundred thousand as right, then you can't see the difference between right and wrong."

In the 15th to 17th centuries in Europe war broke out 3 times per year.

"We owe our long peace to the belittlement of war, the spread of democracy, the expansion of commerce, and the emergence of international organizations."

A change in the norms surrounding violence has to precede a change in the workings of government.

As time passes, anyone not old enough to remember things like slavery and smoking inside offices usually consider them unthinkable.

There is a downward spiral of dehumanization that works with the evolutionary force of disgust. You're taught to find a particular group disgusting, so you dehumanize them, and then, being dehumanized, they appear even more disgusting, in a constant downward cycle.

People force a despised minority to live in squalor, which makes them seem animalistic and subhuman, which encourages the dominant group to mistreat them further, which degrades them still further, removing any tug on the consciousness of the oppressor.

The move towards cleanliness and hygiene made people look more like people and less of a target for disgust.

The human capacity for compassion is not triggered automatically by the presence of another living thing. Rather, it's a way of seeing that needs to be developed.

Reading is a technology for perspective-taking, and once another person's thoughts are in your head, you are observing the world through that person's eyes.

As such, reading may have been one of many catalysts for the humanitarian revolution.

There were 5 wars and 4 atrocities before WWI that killed more people than that war.

Of the 21 worst things that people have ever done to each other, 14 were in centuries before the 20th.

When you scale by population, only one of the 20th century's atrocities even makes the top ten.

Worst Things People Have Ever Done to Each Other:

An Lushan Revolt in 8th century - equivalent to 429,000,000 deaths
Mongol Conquests in 13th century - equivalent to 278,000,000 deaths
Mideast Slave Trade in 7th-19th centuries -equivalent to 132,000,000 deaths
Fall of the Ming Dynasty in 17th century - equivalent to 112,000,000 deaths
Fall of Rome in 3rd-5th centuries - equivalent to 105,000,000 deaths
Tamerlane in the 14th-15th centuries - equivalent to 100,000,000 deaths
Annihilation of the American Indians in 15th-19th centuries - equivalent to 92,000,000 deaths
Atlantic Slave Trade in 15th-19th centuries - equivalent to 83,000,000 deaths
Second World War in 20th century - equivalent to 55,000,000 deaths
Taiping Rebellion in 19th century - equivalent to 40,000,000 deaths

Historical atrocities were most likely extremely underreported. The true figures are likely to be much higher.

Gavrilo Princip, with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, set off a chain reaction that resulted in the deaths of 80,000,000 people. Top that, Albert Einstein! (When deciding on most important person of the 20th century).

Wars fall into a power-law distribution. In a power-law distribution, the chances of a major war are extremely unlikely, but not astronomically unlikely.

Wars are an attrition game where the winner pays the loser's costs as well, and so it makes sense to potential aggressors to one-up the other side incrementally, until they get to a tipping point and war breaks out.

The sunk cost fallacy could also keep nations at war for longer than is worthwhile. People think that since they put so much into this war or whatever that they have to see it through to the end instead of just pulling out and going home.

Great powers account for most of the war deaths and the percentage of time they spent fighting each other has trended downwards leading up to today.

Religious fervor can induce more casualties because people can see themselves as doing the work of God. Thus, they're more likely to want to kill more people on the opposing side.

Religious wars are unlikely to end in negotiation because such acts can be seen as heresy and treason to the religious believers. You don't just give up fighting if you think that you're fighting for eternal salvation or some such nonsense.

There is no such thing as a "nation" in the sense of an ethnocultural group that coincides with a patch of real estate.

A government with sovereignty over a "nation" will inevitably fail to represent the interests of many of the people living there.

The proportion of the population that the nation puts into uniform is the best indicator of its ideological embrace of militarism.

No two stable, mature democracies have ever fought each other, but there are historical counterexamples spanning thousands of years and including fledgling democracies.

Countries are only likely to fight each other if they share a border, so we don't need the democratic peace theory to explain why countries like New Zealand and Paraguay have never fought each other.

The Kantian Triangle is made up of the idea that democracy, trade, and membership in intergovernmental organizations all favor peace.

In 1950, the average conflict killed 33,000 people, but in 2010 that number was less than a thousand.

During the 20th century, 169 million people were killed by their governments, although this is likely to be a little bit of a high estimate.

Genocide wasn't even considered a crime until 1948.

Poor countries are more likely to have political crises but the economic conditions themselves aren't sufficient to cause genocide.

Three men, following ideologies, caused tens of millions of deaths in the 20th century.

Between 1970 and 2007, only one terrorist attack has killed more than 500 people.

Other than 9/11, the total number of people killed on American soil due to terrorism is 340. After 9/11, until 2007, the number has been 11 people.

Almost as many people drown in bathtubs every year than have been killed by terrorist attacks since 1969.

In every year except 1995 and 2001, more Americans have been killed by peanut allergies, bee stings, lightning, deer, and 'ignition or melting of nightwear', than by terrorist attacks.

9/11 cost the terrorists just \$500,000 and the Americans spent half a trillion in return.

There was a movie in 1977 called "That Obscure Object of Desire" where cars and stores blow up at random and the characters barely notice.

Most terrorist groups fail and all of them die out in the end.

No small terrorist organization has ever taken over a state, and 94 percent of them fail to achieve any of their strategic aims.

A feeling of brotherly love is the primary motivator to make people fight in armies.

Military leaders use every trick in the book to make their soldiers feel like genetic relatives and subsequently take on the biologically predictable risks.

10 percent of poll respondents in the Middle East say that suicide bombing is justified, compared with 24 percent of Americans who say that targeting civilians is sometimes justified.

Religion thrives on emotional commitments to texts that no one reads.

Some people don't recognize the progress that we have made in the area of civil rights because they don't want people to ease up. The thinking goes that if people knew we were making progress, they wouldn't try to hard to keep it going.

“For every moral advance in history, there have been social commentators who insist that we have never had it so bad.”

Marital rape wasn't a crime until well into the 1970's.

Men in the 90's were less approving of domestic violence than women in the 60's.

People have gone so crazy with making kids' lives safer that on a re-release of a Sesame Street DVD from 1969-1974, there was a warning on the box saying that it wasn't suitable for children.

Today, if you wanted to have your child abducted and held overnight by a stranger, you'd have to leave them outside and unattended for 750,000 years.

Alan Turing was one of the most brilliant minds of all time, gave western civilization everything we have and love, and yet the British government arrested him and violently persecuted him in 1952 for being gay, and he killed himself at age 42.

Since 1996, the FBI has recorded only 2 anti-gay homicides out of the 17,000 which are committed for every other reason.

Books and the spread of ideas may be the single most important exogenous factor in the development of the rights revolutions.

“Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”

“Regardless of how the trends extrapolate into the future, something remarkable has brought us to the present.”

Not a single category of violence has been pinned to a fixed rate throughout history.

“When an opportunity does arise to eliminate a hated rival with little danger of reprisal, a Darwinian creature will seize it.”

“Darwinian calculations are not experienced directly, but are manifested as emotions, in the above case as anxiety and paralysis.”

Much of human violence is cowardly violence. There are rarely “fair fights.”

A forward panic, or rampage, is when an aggressive coalition has been facing off against a hostile group for a period of time in constant apprehension or fear, and then catches them in a moment of weakness.

Forward panic may involve the transfer from the fear to the rage system.

There is a practical root of violence based on ambition and goal-attainment. The second root of violence is based on individual and group dominance. The third root of violence is revenge. The fourth root of violence is sadism. The fifth root of violence is ideology.

Empathy is not necessarily an inhibitor of violence, as in hunters who empathize with prey in order to track them more efficiently.

Psychopaths don't register brain activity when asked to think about the suffering of others.

Psychopaths make up 1-3 percent of the male population, depending on which definition you use.

Psychopaths are going to be drawn to more violent professions and activities, such as police and the military.

Positive illusions help you recruit people to your side. In competing for an advantage, you stand to gain by exaggerating your strengths. Believing your own exaggeration is better than cynically lying about it, because the arms race between lying and lie detection has equipped your audience with the means to tell if you're telling the truth about your abilities. As long as your exaggerations are somewhat close, your audience can't afford to discount them completely.

To avert a fight, a pair of rivals must not only know who is stronger, but each must know that the other knows.

The presence of an audience doubles the likelihood that an argument between two men will escalate to violence.

Dominance tends to erupt in violence in small social groups where a person's rank determines the entirety of his social worth.

If people belong to many groups and can switch in and out of them, they are more likely to find one in which they are esteemed, and the likelihood of violence is bound to go down, bringing down the consequential nature of insults, etc.

Reconciliation occurs when long-term interests are bound together.

Reconciliation among humans is governed by the perception of common interests.

Testosterone doesn't make men more aggressive across the board, but prepares them for competitions of dominance.

Older men, who are physically weaker but economically and socially stronger, have more to gain from investing in their current offspring than competing for reproductive opportunities.

The problem of violence is a problem of young, unmarried, lawless men competing for dominance, with or without a leader.

Violence is a problem not of low self-esteem, but too much of it, and especially when unearned.

“One of the pacifying features of democracies is that their leadership-selection procedures punish a complete lack of empathy, and their checks and balances can limit the amount of damage that a grandiose leader can do.”

Ressentiment is the combination of nationalism and narcissism where nations believe they have a historical right to greatness and are being thwarted by an internal or external adversary.

Countries behave a lot like individuals.

Sexism ultimately comes from the genetic incentive of men to control the behavior of women.

Because of gender differences in overconfidence, group hostility, and personal violence, women being in charge made, is making, and will make the world a more peaceful place.

Blood revenge is explicitly endorsed by 95 percent of the world's cultures.

Revenge is the motive behind 10-20 percent of homicides.

Towns in medieval France would sometimes "purchase" a condemned criminal from another town so they could entertain their citizens with a public execution.

We typically refrain from actions that would make us feel guilty should we carry them out.

People tend to go along with things when they think that everyone else supports those things.

A society can be taken over by a belief system that the majority of its citizens do not hold individually.

Sympathy is endogenous, an effect rather than a cause of how people relate to one another.

Dumber people are more violent. Fact.

People are more reckless when they have fewer unlived years of life at risk.

The reduction of violence is part of a broader trend towards self-control and an orientation to the future.

The moral sense can paradoxically be a major force for evil.

IQ test scores have been going up an average of 3 points per decade.

An average person today is smarter than 98 percent of the population in 1910. If the effect is taken at face value, then the average person in 1910 would have an IQ of 70 today.

“Cultural and intellectual elites have always felt themselves superior to businesspeople, and it doesn't occur to them to credit those people with something as noble as peace.”

“To review the history of violence is to be repeatedly astounded by the cruelty and waste of it all, and at times to be overcome with anger, disgust, and immeasurable sadness.”